Education and Entertainment: Developing new pathways to student engagement through Library Services and Student Life partnerships

Ruth A. Monnier
Pittsburg State University, rmonnier@pittstate.edu

Mary Mercer
Pittsburg State University, mmercer@pittstate.edu

Anna Stark
Pittsburg State University, aastark@pittstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/culsproceedings

Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Higher Education Commons, Information Literacy Commons, Instructional Media Design Commons, Other Education Commons, Scholarly Communication Commons, and the Scholarly Publishing Commons

Recommended Citation

Education and Entertainment: Developing new pathways to student engagement through Library Services and Student Life partnerships

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused higher ed professionals to pivot how they engage students in programs and events. For the 2020-2021 academic year, Pittsburg State University's Student Life and Library Services created a series of virtual trivia nights. This paper will use the virtual trivia series as a case study to demonstrate the beneficial partnership between Student Life and Library Services at Pittsburg State University. This paper will highlight successes and suggestions on bridging the gap and replicating such a partnership at your institution.

Keywords

Programming, Collaboration, Academic Libraries, Student Life, Trivia, Virtual Programming

Introduction

There have been and continue to be many personal and professional obstacles during this COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions are experiencing the effects of COVID through financial strain, reduced staff, enrollment decreases, and fatigued personnel. More than ever, now is the time to rally around the institution's mission and form partnerships to continue to serve students. Bridging the gap between student life and academic departments on campus can be an excellent way to strengthen student engagement and maximize resources. At Pittsburg State University, Campus Activities, a department of Student Life, and Library Services, a department of Academic Affairs, were able to come together to produce a program series opportunity to continuously engage students and build a lasting collaborative relationship.

Literature Review

Perceptions caused by a lack of knowledge and understanding can form a barrier and impede collaboration between student affairs professionals and academic librarians. O'Halloran notes one common barrier to collaboration between student affairs professionals and academic affairs is the difference of culture. Academic professionals tend to view the role of student affairs as support rather than a partner in student learning (2019). Frost (2010) identifies the lack of shared vocabulary and the disconnect between curricular and co-curricular instruction as other barriers. However, there have been successful co-curricular endeavors between student affairs and academic librarians. Housing and academic librarians have implemented programs such as librarians at the dorms, sleepovers at the library, and workshops for housing assignment selection points (Long, 2011; Otto, Meade, Stafford, & Wahler, 2016; Kelly and Gauder, 2020). Other librarians have found success with a liaison model where librarians connected directly to the student organizations and offices (Crowe, 2010). Wainwright and Davidson's survey highlights the variety of ways in which librarians are partnering with non-academic departments (2017). In the survey, there were 688 total services offered to non-academic departments by librarians and only 5 examples where librarians and student affairs professionals co-hosted events (Wainwright & Davidson, 2017, 129). Building relationships to address the culture difference can lead to co-curricular success.

Background

Pittsburg State University (PSU) is located in southeast Kansas with 6,600 FTE students who participate in more than 200 undergraduate and graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences, College of Education, College of Business, and College of Technology. Founded as a training school for teachers, PSU has a history of providing transformational experiences for its students. The COVID-19 pandemic caused changes to campus life and how the institution delivered its services (Pittsburg State University, 2020). In March 2020, the PSU campus closed and all services were offered remotely. In the summer of 2020, PSU made decisions to change course delivery methods for Fall 2020 as well as implementing safety protocols including wearing masks and socially distant classrooms.

In the late spring and early summer of 2020, it was uncertain how the pandemic would impact southeast Kansas and what, if any safety protocols would be in place for the 2020-2021 school year. Some thought, optimistically, that it might even be over. PSU allowed instructors to make decisions on their course delivery, including face-to-face with protocols in place, hyflex, hybrid, or online only. Based on this uncertainty and the rapidly changing environment, Campus Activities decided to have virtual programming in the fall. Virtual programming decisions eliminated one potential variable – format – for Campus

Activities professionals and ensured that the needs of students would be met, whether students were on campus, off-campus, quarantining, or campus was inaccessible.

Historically, student organizations drive the majority of PSU campus programming due to the institution's belief in allowing students ownership of their co-curricular experiences. In 2020, Campus Activities professionals at PSU recognized the uncertainty and additional challenges placed on students from the pandemic and decided Campus Activities would need to provide and facilitate more programming than a typical year. Additionally, Campus Activities decided the best way to build and sustain relationships between students during this time would be synchronous virtual programming and asynchronous take-and-make events for any students on campus.

Collaboration Goals

The responsibility of Campus Activities professionals is to facilitate the co-curricular experience on a college campus. One of the goals of a co-curricular experience is to expand student connection and provide a catalyst for relationship building. During COVID-19, meeting this goal became increasingly challenging. Offering a variety of virtual events became critical to continue to provide connections for students. A virtual trivia series provided opportunities to engage a diverse student audience who connected over shared interests around a variety of trivia topics. Additionally, this series provided Campus Activities an opportunity to foster collaborative relationships and expand student connections to Library Services. With the cross-promotion of the series, new audiences were reached as some individuals only use the library space instead of participating in library events.

The COVID-19 pandemic has and continues to take an emotional toll on people, including campus professionals. It was important this challenge was recognized and that we seek out ways to help one another going forward to prevent burnout from over programming in both departments (Hudson-Vitale & Waltz, 2020). Besides sharing the workload, the goal of being budget conscious was achieved with this program due to the share of time, talent, and sponsorships by Library Services and Campus Activities.

Case Study: Virtual Trivia Nights

Overview

This yearlong collaboration required coordination between Campus Activities and Library Services. The virtual format allowed for a safe environment and recognized everyone's different situations with COVID-19. In the formation of this collaboration and partnership, expectations were set as to the job responsibilities from each partner as well as when to schedule this programming. Virtual Trivia Nights were synchronous programming five times over the 2020-2021 academic year.

Scheduling

In summer 2020, it was unclear how PSU students would engage with virtual programming. However, it was important to consider the overall campus events schedule and traditional event information (i.e., Homecoming in October and University Commemoration Day in March) to eliminate potential conflicts with other events and barriers to students. Previous campus surveys by Campus Activities revealed a student preference for mid to late weekday nights for co-curricular events. Therefore, trivia nights were held on Thursday or Friday nights at 7 pm CT. Furthermore, each of these trivia nights was themed to make expectations clear on content and appropriate promotion. Two of the events (one during August's Welcome Week and

one in November) were a replacement for traditional campus programming ("Nacho" Average Game Night and Quiz Bowl, respectively). In scheduling the trivia nights for August, November, January, March, and April (Monnier, Mercer & Stark, 2021), Campus Activities and Library Services looked at what else was happening across campus as to not inundate students with trivia. We also wanted to be cognizant of end of semester student stress during Dead Week and Finals (December and May). September, October, and February already had trivia nights hosted by other campus departments and student organizations. We were aware of meeting students' needs rather than programming to simply program, particularly due to the potential of Zoom fatigue and trivia fatigue.

Partnership Expectations

Setting expectations and ensuring that all collaborators have the same understanding of their roles and responsibilities is the first step in any collaboration. For this partnership, an understanding was reached between Campus Activities and Library Services on software licenses, prizes, trivia creation, publicity and marketing materials, and event hosting and moderating. Campus Activities provided funding that included a Kahoot! license and cash prizes for the winners. PSU's institutional Zoom license was used for video conferencing. Library Services wrote trivia questions and answers and provided background information to assist banter between hosts. Campus Activities created graphics, added the event to Gorilla Engage (student engagement software at PSU), and advertised via digital signage in the Student Center and social media. Similarly, Library Services advertised and cross-promoted the events on its building's digital signage, social media, and book displays. For the synchronous trivia nights, it was determined between collaborators that Campus Activities would prepare a script with instructions and announcements as well as moderate the chat, and Library Services would host and co-host with any "celebrity" guests. By setting these previously mentioned expectations at the beginning of the collaboration, both departments understood and were able to fulfill their responsibilities.

The collaboration between Library Services and Campus Activities allowed departments to maximize their money and time. Before reaching out to Library Services, Campus Activities reviewed two overarching options for implementing trivia, which involved varying levels of time and funding commitments.

The following options were considered:

A. Campus Option. Utilizing the time and talent of staff and an online trivia platform, Campus Activities could advertise the series, create trivia questions, format content, generate event outlines, moderate the events, and distribute prizes. This option was the most affordable with costs attributed to a trivia platform and prizes. However, this option was the most time-consuming.

B. Outsource Option. Campus Activities had the option of outsourcing entire trivia events or aspects of trivia events by working with college entertainment agencies. Campus Activities could purchase individual or series trivia packages that would provide pre-written trivia questions that were already prepared in Kahoot!. In addition to paying for the trivia, a Kahoot! license would be needed. Campus Activities could contract a college entertainer/celebrity host to moderate trivia events or the entire series. Finally, there was a completely hands-off option which would include working with a college entertainment agency to prepare and host trivia events in their entirety. All outsourced options would still have required event advertisement resources and prize funding.

After reviewing these strategies to implement a virtual trivia series, Campus Activities reached out to Library Services to collaborate. Ultimately, facilitating all aspects of planning and implementing the series was a large time commitment for one department, and outsourcing event elements to an entertainment agency was not within the budget. Based on previous experiences working with outsourced agencies, Library Services was able to offer resources that were as effective as working with a college agency for this event series.

Results

This series collaboration between Campus Activities and Library Services was successful in cultivating departmental relationships and engaging students. The five trivia nights had an estimated total of 120 student participants and 3 different co-hosts. Since trivia night, the one professor co-host has continued to assist Campus Activities as needed, such as Homecoming Royalty Judging. Additionally, Campus Activities noted an increase in male presenting students at virtual trivia nights, especially compared to previous in-person events.

As a result of Library Services moderating trivia nights and interacting with students in a more informal and social setting, the library's approachability increased. The positive interactions with Library Services in turn helped students see the library as a fun and friendly place and lowered anxiety they have about the library. Unsolicited student comments to the Learning Outreach Librarian in the Library included: "You are the trivia librarian. Can you help me?" and "Trivia nights are so fun, when is the next one?" Students could envision themselves in the space and realize the 21st-century library is not always a quiet place. Overall, new student audiences were exposed to the library and its services.

The collaboration between Library Services and Campus Activities in developing a virtual trivia series was a win-win venture. Campus Activities was able to introduce students to Library Services in a social setting while receiving help in planning, promoting, and facilitating trivia.

Recommendations

Valuing Each Other

The work of collaboration should begin before a conversation about an initiative even starts. Before entering a conversation about implementing collaborative events, it's important to research and understand campus structures and priorities. A great way to better understand another campus department can include volunteering at an event when an open call is communicated. For example, librarians have assisted Campus Activities as judges for Homecoming activities and Quiz Bowl moderators. Also, Campus Activities professionals have attended library events like opening of floors and University Authors receptions. Begin a collaborative effort with an understanding of each partner and how they demonstrate the value of the student experience (Frost, 2010). Every student life division is going to operate differently and have varying priorities, so take time to evaluate how the division and offices function. Look into existing campus programs and how those initiatives are empowering students. Enter a collaborative conversation prepared to discuss why this partnership should exist and what the library can contribute (Wainwright & Davidson, 2017, 122). Ensure there are plenty of opportunities to ask questions to gain mutual insight into the scope of one another's work to create a strong foundation for support.

Thinking Outside the Box

One impact of COVID-19 at PSU was that even though the student center, where Campus Activities is located, tended to be surrounded by students, the students were coming to campus a lot less and more intentionally. As a result, they tended to be in the library studying. Therefore, Campus Activities had to rethink their normal touchpoints and information table placements. When student organizations were doing giveaways, Campus Activities encouraged everyone to set up at the library because the student traffic was greatest in that location. Students need to be met where they are physically located.

While a virtual trivia series was successful for Pittsburg State University, this may not be the collaborative endeavor that is correct for every campus. Assess resources, usage, and needs to create an idea of what can be offered and what gaps need to be filled. Know when students are showing up the most, and when occupancy lulls are for the library. Maybe usage is higher during finals than the first week of the semester. This is the information student life counterparts are going to want to know because their focus is finding the best ways to create touchpoints with students. Offer up some lounge space for a poet or an afternoon acoustic coffeehouse musician. Review the university calendar or student engagement software to see if there are already some existing events that would work for collaboration. For example, Hispanics of Today hosts events throughout Hispanic Heritage Month. By reaching out to the organization, a collaborative book display was created in the library to supplement their standing activities. Connect with student life while recognizing they may already have an event plan, but in the future, they might be open to having the library host the event or otherwise be involved.

Conclusion

Due to the collaboration between Campus Activities Center and Library Services, virtual trivia nights were a success at Pittsburg State University. Just because PSU virtual trivia was successful, does not mean that it will be successful at another institution. Programming is not one-size-fits-all; however, the successful elements of this collaboration can be replicated. Take time to evaluate the institution, consider potential programs and ideas to implement with student life professionals, and reflect on how to support their programming to build a collaboration that will benefit all members, especially the students. The keys to successful program collaborations are understanding the culture differences and building relationships with student life professionals.

References

Crowe, K. M. (2010). Student affairs connection: promoting the library through co-curricular activities. *Collaborative Librarianship*, *2*(3), 154-158. https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol2/iss3/5

Frost, R. A., Strom, S. L., Downey, J., Schultz, D. D., & Holland, T. A. (2010). Enhancing student learning with academic and student affairs collaboration. *Community College Enterprise, 16(*1), 37-51. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A227078434/AONE?u

Hudson-Vitale, C., & Waltz, R. (2020). Caring for our colleagues: Wellness and support strategies for remote library teams. *College & Research Libraries News, 8*1(10), 494. https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.81.10.494

Kelly, K. & Gauder, H. (2020). Taking flight as a campus partner: Library programs support a residential curriculum. In Silvia Vong & Manda Vrkljan (Eds.), *Learning Beyond the Classroom: Engaging Students in Information Literacy through Co-Curricular Activities* (pp. 21-41). https://ecommons.udayton.edu/books/57

Long, D. (2011). Embedded right where the students live: A librarian in the residence halls. In K. Calkins and C. Knevild (Eds.), *Embedded librarians: Moving beyond one-shot instruction* (pp. 199-211). Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries. https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml/31/

Monnier, R., Mercer, M., & Stark, A. (2021). Education and entertainment: Developing new pathways to student engagement through library services and student life partnerships. [PowerPoint slides]. Pittsburg State University. https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/axe_faculty/21/

O'Halloran, K. C. (2019). A classification of collaboration between student and academic affairs. *College Student Journal, 53*(3), 301-314. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A603511048/AONE?u

Otto, J. J., Meade, Q. H., Stafford, J. L., & Wahler, P. (2016). Library lights out. *Digital Library Perspectives, 32*(3), 192–208. https://doi.org/10.1108/DLP-09-2015-0018

Pittsburg State University. (2020, July 22). Student guide for returning to campus. https://www.pittstate.edu/office/health-services/coronavirus/student-guide-for-returning-to-campus-fall-2020-7-22-2020.pdf

Wainwright, A. & Davidson, C. (2017) Academic libraries and non-academic departments: A survey and case studies on liaising outside the box, *Collaborative Librarianship, 9*(2), 117-134. https://digitalcommons.du.edu/collaborativelibrarianship/vol9/iss2/9